

New Jersey School Board Offers Obscene Justification for Dismissal of Palestinian Teacher's Discrimination Lawsuit

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By Ben Norton / AlterNet

Sireen Hashem says she was told not to mention the Middle East, Arab culture, or Islam in her classroom.

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Photo Credit: CNN Screengrab

New Jersey School Board officials are defending themselves in a discrimination lawsuit filed by a Palestinian-American teacher by rejecting the fact that her homeland even exists, claiming in court, "Palestine is not a nation."

Sireen Hashem sued the Hunterdon County school district in December 2015, after her contract at Hunterdon Central Regional High School was not renewed. The history teacher, who is Palestinian and Muslim, accused the school of firing her because of her race, national origin and religion.



Hashem said school officials prevented her from teaching topics that her non-Arab and non-Muslim colleagues taught. According to the lawsuit, the school principal, Suzanne Cooley, told Hashem "she should not mention Islam or the Middle East in her class," and "should not bring her culture, life experience or background into the classroom."

When she asked why she was being subjected to different treatment than other teachers, Hashem alleges she was fired in retaliation. Superintendent Christina Steffner told the teacher "she caused trouble because she was Palestinian since the day she started working," the suit alleges. In April 2015, Hashem was told she was being "let go."

When the lawsuit was filed, Hashem's attorney, Omar Mohammedi, told NJ.com that the teacher had been "treated poorly and discriminated against."

School officials have rejected Hashem's accusations. Comegno Law Group, which is representing the school, has refused to publicly comment on the case.

In response to Hashem's lawsuit, Hunterdon Central Regional High School is defending itself by insisting "Palestine is not a nation." The teacher's attorney told NJ.com this week that the school's legal representation, which rejected local media's request for comment, made this argument in court.

"I think it's a bogus and baseless argument," Mohammedi told NJ.com. "She is Palestinian. It doesn't matter if the United States recognizes Palestine or not. We believe this is a case of discrimination."

A motion to dismiss the lawsuit was filed, but was denied. Mohammedi accused the school of "harassing" his client in a "fishing expedition" when it served Hashem eight subpoenas, seeking irrelevant personal information going back 25 years.

According to Hashem's lawsuit, a student wrote false allegations about the teacher on Facebook in September 2014, claiming her brother was a terrorist and smearing her as anti-Semitic. Hashem's lawyer called these lies and

accused the student of "defaming" the teacher, without facing any punishment.

In fact, Hashem has explicitly rejected anti-Semitism in the past. In a May 2007 article in New Jersey Jewish News, cited by [Courthouse News Service](#), the teacher praised an event at Princeton University mixing Arab and Jewish cultures. "We are similar cultures. We should get together," Hashem said. "We eat halal. They eat kosher. What's the difference? We should work it out."

Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry are rapidly growing in the U.S. President Donald Trump ran an overtly racist campaign inciting Islamophobic hatreds, pledging to ban Muslims from entering the country. The number of anti-Muslim hate crimes is the highest since the period immediately following the 9/11 attacks.

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